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# AVUNCULATE AND FOSTERAGE

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A survey of the Indo-European peoples shows that most of them knew an affectionate relationship of ego-mother's brother and mother's father in contrast with a more formal relationship of ego-father and father's family. This is explained by the absence of the patria potestas for the maternal uncle and grandfather. The similarity of the latter roles will account for the derivation of the word for 'uncle' from the one for 'grandfather'. The survey also shows that the role of the maternal grandfather was not negligible. The preference in fosterage for the maternal family is explained by the principle of education outside the (extended) family. Avunculate and fosterage are no arguments for a supposed matrilineal or matriarchal state.

1. (Problems) In his study of Indo-European institutions Émile Benveniste (1969, 223-237) discussed the *avus/avunculus* problem.<sup>1</sup> Since his solution has been shown to be unsatisfactory,<sup>2</sup> I propose discussing the following interrelated questions:

a. Why is the word for 'uncle' often derived from the word for 'grandfather', e.g. *avunculus* from *avus*, and which grandfather, paternal or maternal, is meant in that case?

b. Was there a more cordial, affectionate relationship between the mother's brother (henceforth MoBr) and the sister's son (SiSo) in contrast with a more formal, cold or severe relationship of father and son?

c. Did the mother's father (MoFa) occupy a negligible place in the family relations (Benveniste, 1969, 226)?

To answer these questions I first give a survey of the material upon which such a discussion should be based, in which survey

1. I am indebted to Prof. J. Gonda and Rolf Bremmer for friendly aid, and to R.S.P. Beekes and Th. Korteweg for reading and improving the manuscript. When I was working on this article I learned that R.S.P. Beekes was preparing an analysis of the *avus/avunculus* problem. We decided to publish the two articles together and reduce overlaps. Therefore I refer at times to Beekes' article which precedes this one.

2. Cf. Beekes, *supra*, to whom I also refer for an introduction into and the history of the problem of the uncle/nephew relationship.

I pay special attention to fosterage, i.e. the upbringing outside the paternal home, since this proved to be very fruitful. This survey cannot lay claim to completeness – if that were possible anyway – but gives more material than any other one on these problems and enough, I believe, to distinguish certain patterns. In order not to overburden this article I restricted myself to stating the nature of our evidence and give some examples to illustrate my case whereby it should be understood that the stress on a special relationship between MoBr and SiSo or the upbringing by the maternal family implies the absence of such a relationship between *ego* and father, father's brother and father's father or the upbringing by the paternal family.

2. (Survey) We will start with India for which the evidence has been collected by Bachofen (1966, *passim*) and Ghurye (1962, 270-276). In the Vedic literature we are frequently shown the cooperation of the MoBr Visvamitra and the SiSo Jamadagni. In the *Jaiminiya Upanisadbrahmana* we are told about the relationship between the kings Kaupayeya and Kesin Darbhya, a relationship so deep that, when his uncle died, Kesin Darbhya started to wander in the jungle to dispel his dejection. These examples, due to the nature of Vedic literature, are scarce but once we reach the epos Mahābhārata there are numerous cases (Ghurye 1962, 320 n 43). Hopkins (1889, 141 n) thought this to be a later development since, as he argued, in the older law the *pitruya* 'father's brother' had precedence above the *matula* 'mother's brother'. Hopkins has been followed by H. Lommel (Bachofen 1966, 619) but this argument will not hold because this is exactly what we should expect since the relationship MoBr/SiSo is an affectionate one which is not based on the law. Among the eastern Indian people *matula* even developed into an endearing term of address (Ghurye 1962, 300).<sup>3</sup>

For fosterage we have the case of Bharata who was sent to the palaces of his MoBr Yudhajit and MoFa (Bachofen 1966, 155).

Among the ancient Persians the MoBr was called the 'up-bringer'. This title was also found in Afghanistan (Mazahéri 1938, 190 f). The words used, *dayeak* and *dayi* respectively, are

3. A similar development can be found among the Slavonic peoples (Gasparini 1973, 291). Compare also our *uncle*, *Oheim*, (Dutch) *oom* etc. as an endearing term of address!

the terminus technicus for the fosterfather as Widengren (1968, 69-80) has shown. We conclude from this that among the Persians fosterage found place at the home of the MoBr. Cyrus, however, stayed at the court of Astyages, the father of his mother Mandane (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 1.4) but it is not impossible that his MoBr Cyaxares also lived there (*ibidem*).

Among the Ossetes, an outlying Indo-Iranian community, which has been repeatedly studied by Dumézil, the death of the SiSo could be avenged by the MoBr, for whom a special part of the bride-price (Luzbetak 1951, 87) was also reserved. Here, *atalytsestvo* 'fosterage' (Kosven 1936) must have been taken place also in the house of the MoFa as appears from the education of the son of Uryzmag who was raised in the house of the god of the waters, the father of his mother Satana (Dumézil 1931, 32 f).

For the Hittites the evidence is of course scarce but we happen to know that fosterage was not unknown to them (Laroche 1949, 63). The upbringing in the house of the mother's brother was probably not unusual since king Labarna says on his deathbed: "Da mag doch niemand seinen Schwestersohn noch weiterhin als Pflegekind heranziehen!" (Sommer-Falkenstein 1938, 2 f).

For Greece our evidence is scarce too but it looks significant that in *Iliad* 16.717 Apollo appears to Hector in the shape of his MoBr to persuade him. When Heracles' bastard Tlepolemos has killed the MoBr of Heracles, he has to flee since all Heracles' sons and grandsons threaten him (*Iliad* 2.662 ff). Also in modern Greece the favourite uncle is the MoBr (Campbell 1964, 105) and it is highly likely that we encounter here a direct inheritance of antiquity since modern research has shown an astonishing continuity with the ancient world as regards social institutions and values (Campbell 1975). To the pre-eminence of the MoBr also points, I suggest, the word *nennos* which meant 'mother's brother' (Pollux 3.22; IG XII.3) and 'mother's father' (Pollux 3.16). For Eustathius (on *Iliad* 14.118), who wrote a millennium after Pollux, the word meant 'mother's brother' and 'father's brother'. A similar extension of meaning<sup>4</sup> can also be observed of *avunculus* and *Oheim* and finds its easi-

4. That the meaning 'father's brother' is a later development also appears from the related words: Skt. *nana* 'gammer, mother', NPers. *nana* 'idem', Scr. *naná* 'moth-

est explanation in the greater popularity of the MoBr.<sup>5</sup>

For fosterage our sources are much fuller. Here we find the complete dominance of the maternal family as Gernet<sup>6</sup> (1955, 19-28) has shown. Theseus was raised by his MoFa (Plutarchus, *Thes.* 4), just as Hippolytos (Pausanias 1.22.2), Aipyros (Id. 4.3.8), Pyrrhos (Apollodorus 5.11) and Kisses (*Iliad* 11.221 ff). But also the MoBr could be the upbringer, as appears from the account of the murder by Daedalus of his SiSo, the subject of which formed the start in 1880 of a long series of *Antiquarische Briefe* on the avunculate by Bachofen (1966, 118 ff).

For a special relationship among the Romans between MoBr and SiSo our data are scarce. We find an interesting case in the early republic where the sons of the first consul Brutus conspire with Marcus and Manius, brothers of Brutus' wife (Dionysius Halicarnassensis, *Antiquitates Romanae* 5.6.4). Not unimportant seems also, as L.F. Janssen points out to me, that the preferred relationship of adopter-adopted is the one between MoBr and SiSo<sup>7</sup> (Alfs 1950, 88). This is the more relevant as adoptions also occurred between father's brother and brother's son (Alfs *ibid.*). This preference perhaps still shows in the dynastic policy of Augustus who chose his SiSo Marcellus as the husband for his daughter Julia, clearly designating him in this way as his successor and passing by his close friend Agrippa. We may also cite the epitaphs where we repeatedly find *nepos fecit avunculo* (Beekes *supra*) but not, as far as I know, *nepos fecit patruo*.<sup>8</sup>

The legends around Romulus and Remus show that the Romans must have attached some importance to the mother's father. When the daughter of Numitor, Rhea Silvia, had given birth to twins, they were exposed. Later, after they had been

er', Bulg. *nén'a* 'mother's sister' (cf. Hesychius *nánnē: mētrós adelphē*). Rather striking is, as Beekes points out to me, the connection with 'upbringing': Bulg. *nēni, nēnčo* 'upbringing (of younger by older one)', Ru. *n'an'a* 'child's nurse', Lat. *nonnus* 'tutor'.

5. For the MoFa the material has been collected by Bachofen (1966, 306). Interesting for the position of the MoBr are also Pindarus *P.* 8.35-37, *id. N.* 4.80, *id. I.* 6.62.

6. See on Gernet, a fine but too long neglected scholar, S.C. Humphreys, *The Work of Louis Gernet, History and Theory* 10 (1971), 172-196.

7. As was the case with the Slavs (Gasparini 1973, 286).

8. The severity of the *patruus* 'father's brother' was even proverbial, A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer* (Leipzig 1890), 268 s.v. *patruus*.

found and had safely grown up, they killed Amilius, Numitor's brother who had seized the throne, and Numitor was acclaimed king when the twin had greeted their grandfather as king, *cum avum regem salutassent* (Livius 1.6.2), which, incidentally, shows that (contra Benveniste 1969, 226) the Romans used plain *avus* for the MoFa.

For the Slavonic peoples Gasparini<sup>9</sup> (1973, 277-297) has collected extensive evidence for a special place of the MoBr. He even comments (291): "Se si fosse lasciato agli Slavi recitare il Pater noster secondo il loro spirito, non avrebbero invocato un Padre nostro, ma uno zio nostro che e nei cieli". Gasparini's evidence is very important because he has been able to collect material about the normal everyday life which, due to the religious and epic nature of a large part of our evidence, is rather unusual. The MoBr has the best place at a wedding banquet in Montenegro. In Serbia he gave the first beret or the first belt. He is everywhere the godfather par excellence. When the MoBr had died he was mourned much longer than anyone of the paternal kin.

For the ancient Germans we have already the testimony of Tacitus<sup>10</sup> that the sister's children are as dear to the MoBr as they are to their father. Among the ancient Icelanders this relationship was even proverbial: 'May men be most like their mother's brothers'.<sup>11</sup>

For fosterage we have our earliest example probably in Wodan himself who received his wisdom from the brother of his mother Bestla (Hávamal str. 140). The best known example is, of course, Beowulf who was fostered by his MoFa Hrethel (Beowulf, 2428 ff) and with whose son Hygelac he had a close relationship (Beowulf 261, 343 etc.). Also in the Icelandic sagas we meet our type of fosterage. In the saga of Gisli we are told that Gisli stayed at home but his youngest brother Ari was fostered by Styrkar, his MoBr (Gísla saga c.2). Guttorm was the MoBr of king Harald and his fosterfather (Egils saga c.26). We

9. I am indebted to Dr. C. Grottanelli for making available to me Gasparini's book since it was unobtainable in the Dutch libraries.

10. Tacitus, *Germania* 20.5: Sororum filiis idem apud avunculum qui ad patrem honor; quidam sanctiorem artiolemque hunc nexum sanguinis arbitrantur et in accipiendis obsidibus magis exigunt tanquam et animum firmius et domum latius teneant.

11. *Pals saga* in Biskupa Sögur I, 1858, 134: *moourbro orum veroi menn likastir.*

may also compare the behaviour of the early orphaned Glum who, when hard pressed, flees to his MoFa, who treats him exceptionally well (*Glúma saga* c.6).

It will now hardly be surprising that in the Celtic epics of England and Ireland the closest relationship is the one between MoBr and SiSo: Arthur and Gawain,<sup>12</sup> and Conchobar and Cuchulain. In the *Conte del Graal* we find that the Grail king is the MoBr of Perceval (Nitze 1912). The same close relationship is encountered in numerous ancient English ballads (Gummere 1901).

Fosterage occurred in pagan and Christian circles. Fiacha Muillethan was fostered by his MoFa Dill the Druid (O'Curry 1873, 375). Saint Abbanus was sent by his parents to 'sanctum Ybarum episcopum germanum matris sue' (Plummer 1910, 7). Saint Patrick was fostered by his mother's *sister* (Stokes 1890, 151), and this is the only case I have met of such an upbringing. This preference for the maternal family appears already in the ancient law of Ireland, *Senchus Mor*, recorded in the fifth century, where it is stated that: 'the kinship of the mother or the kinship of fosterage: it happens that they are one and the same'.<sup>13</sup>

We will end this survey with some examples from the Middle Ages. Here, where our sources start to flow more richly, we find an overwhelming evidence for a special relationship between MoBr and SiSo. As Bell (1922, 105) observes: 'Of all relationships that of the uncle and the nephew is the most prominent in the medieval German epic and the most glorified. The uncle is usually related on the maternal side, the nephew being identified in an overwhelming number of cases as the sister's son' (similarly Aron 1920). Farnsworth (1913, 198) too observed, as regards the *Chansons de Geste* that 'the poets introduce the nephew in general as an important element of the epic story, but in the majority of cases they take particular pains to characterise him as the sister's son'. The examples are too well known to need elaboration. Charlemagne and Roland, Guillaume and Vivien, Mark and Tristan, Hildebrandt and Wolfhart: wherever we turn we find the same relationship the depth of which we

12. I am indebted to Prof. A.M. Draak for this reference.

13. *Senchus Mor* I, 0. 260: *selb maithrai no selv altrama: ro bi co comraicet huile for oen.*



can sense in the moving words of Hagen when his SiSo Patafried has been slain by Walther (and note the *nepotis* at the end as the climax of the speech)

Cetera fors tulerim, si vel dolor unus abesset:

Unice enim carum, rutilum, blandum, pretiosum

Carpisti florem mucronis falce tenellum.

Haec res est, pactum qua irritasti prior alnum,

Idcircoque gazam cupio pro foedere nullam.

Sitne tibi soli virtus, volo discere, in armis,

Deque tuis manibus caedem perquiro nepotis.

*Waltharius* 1272 ff

3. (Conclusion) Even though our evidence was often scarce, it is clear that we can draw some conclusions from this survey. There was certainly nearly everywhere a special relationship between MoBr and SiSo and the maternal grandfather was not a quantité négligeable. At the same time, however, a new problem appears to have arisen. Why was a child fostered by his maternal uncle or grandfather and not his paternal one's?

4. (Mother's brother) The pre-eminence of the MoBr is not restricted to the Indo-Europeans; the phenomenon occurs in other parts of the world, especially Africa. There is, however, one great difference with the African situation. The African relationship has also an ambivalent aspect which finds its expression in a joking relationship and ritual stealing, elements which cannot (anymore?) be found among the Indo-Europeans even though there, as in Africa, the MoBr plays a role too in ritual situations such as christening (Gasparini 1973, 282 f) and wedding (Luzbetak 1951, 201; Gasparini 1973, 277 ff). These data are admittedly scarce but this is most likely due to the nature of our evidence which was so often centred on the heroic deeds of warriors and kings.

Formerly scholars used to explain the pre-eminence of the MoBr by postulating a state of matriarchy but this solution will now only be accepted by some Marxist anthropologists.<sup>14</sup> Since the pre-eminence of the MoBr in patriarchal societies is so frequent, we discard also those explanations which start from a particular ideology of a given society (Griaule 1954; Adler, Cartry 1972) but follow those scholars who have contrasted the cordial relationship of MoBr and SiSo with the severe one of

14. See, e.g., M. Kosven, *Avunkulat, Sovetskaja Ethnografija* 1948, no 2, 3-46.



father and son (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, first published 1924; Lévy-Strauss 1972, first published 1945; and especially Goody 1959 and Turner 1974): in the paternal family the MoBr is the outsider who is not hindered by the patria potestas and therefore can develop an affectionate relationship.

Even though a woman is a jural minor in patrilineal societies and her children do not enjoy the membership or property of her descent corporation, her sons, nevertheless, have certain rights. According to Goody (1959, 80-83) these rights in terms of group membership, express themselves in assistance on ritual occasions and, in terms of property, in ritual stealing. Although this stealing cannot be found among the Indo-Europeans, we have perhaps to look in this direction for a solution of the problem as to why property was sometimes transmitted from MoBr to SiSo (Bachofen 1966, 422 f, 430; Farnsworth 1913, 88).<sup>15</sup>

5. (Mother's father) It is rather surprising that hardly any scholar has paid attention to the role of the MoFa who is just as much an outsider in the paternal family as the MoBr. Only Bachofen (1966, 305 ff) and Radcliffe-Brown (1952, 29 f) have discussed his role. Even though information is scarce, the latter is able to conclude that the MoFa and the MoBr "are the objects of very similar behaviour patterns, of which the outstanding feature is the indulgence on the one side and the liberty on the other". Radcliffe-Brown does not, however, explain why we find in this respect a much more prominent role for the MoBr. The explanation, I suggest, is found in the relationship brother-sister. Scholars from Bachofen (1966, 157-186) to Van Baal (1975, 80 ff) have noticed the very close relationship between these two. The relationship of the daughter with the father presumably suffered from the same setback as the one between the father and the son but the brother is always concerned for his sister and is her only protector when the father dies. He was therefore, obviously, much more welcome in his sister's house and could in that way develop a deeper relationship with this SiSo than did his father.

Consequently, in the similarity of their roles lies the explana-

15. Unfortunately Farnsworth gives no details but an interesting case is recorded by Ortlieb of Zwiefalten of Count Liutold who gives a share of his patrimony to the two sons *sororis eius Mathildis de Horeburc* (MGH, SS. X, p. 76 f.), cf. K. Schmid, *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 105 (1957), 27 f.

tion for the derivation of the word for 'uncle' from the word for 'grandfather' (but see also Beekes, *supra*). In the case of *avus/avunculus* this means that *avus*, originally, must have meant the MoFa as Bachofen (1966, 305) already suggested. H. Junod, on whose material Radcliffe-Brown had based his discussion, also pointed out that among the BaThonga the MoBr was called *kokwana* '(maternal) grandfather' (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, 24). The diminutive form *avunculus* can be best explained from the extended family on the mother's side where the uncle was the 'little grandfather' for *ego* just as father's father could be the 'great father' (Risch 1944).

6. (Fosterage)<sup>16</sup> One of the typical features of the Indo-European family was the *fosterage*, the upbringing outside the paternal home.<sup>17</sup> Interwoven with this upbringing became the numerous legends of the exposition of the hero, which have been exhaustively collected by Binder (1964). Favourite up-bringers were the shepherd, as in the legends round *Cyros* (Widengren 1960; Alföldi 1951; id. 1974, 134-141) and *Romulus* and *Remus* (Alföldi 1974, 107-133), and the smith<sup>18</sup> (e.g. *Wayland*), people who were of low social standing and outside normal society. This low social standing must have been such a normal feature that it will explain why as late as the Middle Ages (Bühler 1964) and even in the 19th century among the *Ossetes* (Kosven 1936) children were given by the nobility to their inferiors for upbringing and the fosterfather was considered to be inferior to the giving father as is well illustrated by the

16. The following observations bear, necessarily, a provisional character. I hope later to discuss in detail the roles of the smith and the shepherd and their place in the *Männerbund*, and the connections between fosterage, the legends of exposition and initiation.

17. As regards this practice we find that all terms used are connected with the verb 'to feed', which seems to point to a common origin. On the Iranian *dayeak*, Widengren 1968, 78; on the Greek terminology, A. Cameron, *ΘΕΙΤΟΣ and related terms in the inscriptions of Asia Minor*, in W.M. Calder/J. Keil (eds.), *Anatolian Studies* W.H. Buckler (Manchester 1939), 27-62 and E. Eichgrün, *Kallimachos und Apollonios* (Diss. Berlin 1961), 183-194; on *fosterage*, L. Hellmuth, *Die Germanische Blutsbruderschaft* (Wien 1975), 212 f.; on the Celtic *altram*, J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern 1959), Vol I, 27; on the French *nourri*, C. Schubert, *Der Pflegesohn (nourri) im französischen Heldenepos* (Diss. Marburg 1905).

18. Note that the smithy was often used as the *Männerhaus*, R. Wolfram, *Schwerttanz und Männerbund* 1-3 (Kassel 1936-38), 320.

refusal of the English king Aethelstan to foster the son of Harald, the king of Norway (Haralds saga c. 21).

This tradition of an education outside the paternal home had a long life and could still be observed in its full force in the Middle Ages. Indeed, the rise of feudality (Bloch 1939, 213-221; 345-350) and the growth of the monasteries (McLaughlin 1975, 129) could hardly be imagined without this tradition. The reasons for this kind of education are obscure and have hardly been investigated (but see Steinmetz 1928, 1-113; Bühler 1964; Rassem 1975, 102 f), but it is clear that education away from the parents was the tradition. This principle gives us consequently the simple explanation for the preference of the maternal family in fosterage. The oldest form of the Indo-European family was, as Delbrück was the first to see, the extended family.<sup>19</sup> Here, the head of the family lived together with all his male descendants and their families. If in this situation the son was educated in the house of his paternal uncle or grandfather, he did not really leave home and for that reason the maternal family only could be taken into consideration for fosterage. This particular upbringing does not, therefore, presuppose a matrilineal background (Widengren 1968, 100) or a change in wedding practices (Gernet 1955, 28). And the tradition of a child being brought up within the maternal family was clearly strong enough to survive the progressive nucleation of the family.

7. (Matriarchy) I may perhaps close with the observation that, if my analysis is right, it has shaken one the last foundations of Bachofen's theories on *Mutterrecht*. Western social anthropologists had already said farewell to Bachofen<sup>20</sup> but his Greek examples have held their ground until very recently. Only a few years ago they began to fall. The Lycian inscriptions (Pembroke 1966; Pugliese Carratelli 1964, 156), Herodotus' descriptions of matriarchy (Pembroke 1967), the Locrian foundation myth (Pembroke 1970; Vidal-Naquet 1972; Briquel 1974; Compennolle 1975, 1976) — all have recently been more satis-

19. This does not necessarily exclude, however, the occasional occurrence of nuclear families, as appears from the studies in P. Laslett (ed.), *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge 1974<sup>2</sup>).

20. The recent attempts by Alföldi (1974, 42-53) to revive the notion of matriarchy is totally unconvincing. Very inspiring on the theme of 'women on top', N.Z. Davies, *Society and Culture in early modern France* (London 1975), 124-151.

factorily explained than did Bachofen but it is a fitting tribute to this gifted Swiss that nearly a century had to pass before scholars could offer a better interpretation of the themes first discussed by him.

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